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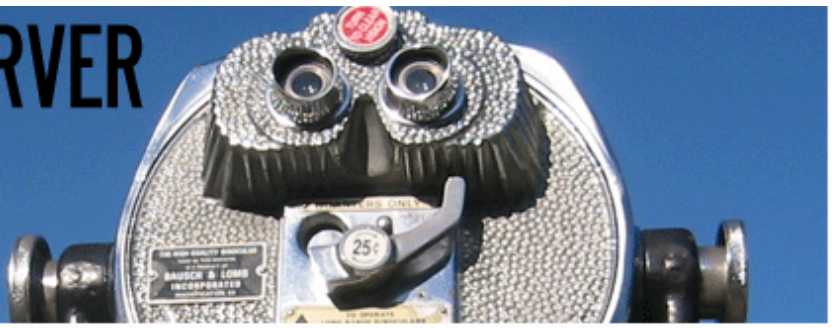

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More

Five-spice memories of the departed

Commentary
By Steven Lim
15 September 2006

Scents and aromas, even foul smells, can conjure memories from the mind's deep recesses.

For me, five-spice is one aroma that does this.

A versatile seasoning in Chinese cooking, five-spice powder comprises cassia bark, cloves, star anise, fennel and cumin. In Mainland China, variation of ingredients such as Szechuan peppercorns, star anise seeds and ginger are sometimes used.

I believe the piquant scent of five-spice was imprinted in me at a young age.

I recall Chinese New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival, when the house would be replete with the smell of five-spice, invariably combined with the aromas of simmering meats, garlic and soy sauce.

Braised duck was a perennial dish during the reunion dinner on Chinese New Year Eve while rice dumplings, wrapped in bamboo leaves for the Dragon Boat Festival, would have meat fillings infused with five-spice scents.

As an endlessly curious boy, I used to stand near the wok and observe all that was going on.

These things you take for granted, until it is lost forever.

Five-spice has now also become an inseparable part of the memories I hold of my mother, who died of cancer three years ago.

After a person dies, you remember the departed with unsatisfactory memories. They lack a physicality; a here-and-now dimension.

The senses, though, act as a conduit via which some of our strongest memories are created and are possibly also the best means through which buried memories are revived.

And that seems the case with memories of my mother, for she was an experienced cook who often filled the house with aromas.

Five-spice used to linger in the air at home because it was often used in braised dishes, which are cooked via a process of simmering that dissipates the scent into the environment.

Five-spice also reminds me of her love, for the braising process required much patience.

Such is the associational nature of the human memory that an aroma can conjure up an experiencing of the departed.

No more do these scents of five-spice fill the house, after my mother and grandmother passed away in the same year. I suppose they could not be parted so easily.

With their deaths went the knowledge and skill that goes into the preparation of braised duck and bamboo-wrapped dumplings.

It was a craving for duck on a weekend during which I had ran out of ideas on what to cook that led me to resurrect what I remembered.

Although it is impossible to recreate the exact flavours since there was no recipe to refer to, I managed to recall most of the ingredients used.

Mama, if you ever do read this, perhaps you can tell me in a dream what I had missed out?

Besides the five-spice, I used good quality dark soya sauce, garlic, galangal and Chinese wine in my first attempt.

Amazingly, other recollections of the process came back to me as I prepared the dish.

A faint flashback of the kitchen, bathed in sunshine, and my mother's hand stuffing spring onion, ginger slices and garlic into the duck emerged.

This was followed by another fragment of memory - of my mother ladling the fats away from the surface of the braising liquid from the large wok.

And then the faint smile she had on her face, it being the festive season.

That first attempt at braising the five-spice duck took me 5 hours. I had not realized how accurate my memory was until my 18-year-old brother tasted it.

"It tastes like what Mama used to make," he said casually.

A tight knot formed in my chest, that of a poignant joy and relief.

Ingredients for braised duck:

1 whole duck (approximately 1.5kg)
Chinese five-spice powder
2 slices ginger
2 stalks spring onions (only the white portion)
3 cloves garlic (whole)

2 shallots (whole)
Galangal (*lan jiang*)
Sugar and salt to taste
Good quality dark soya sauce
Shaoxing wine

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